The Politics of City Building: Pro-Growth Planning Regimes And Equitable Distribution of Infrastructure

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Neoliberal governance and pro-growth planning regimes divide the urban form into small patches of private development. This division results in a fragmentation of infrastructure and an increase in sociospatial inequalities. City planners and policymakers evaluate the value of urban infrastructure projects based on economic development potential, including anticipated economic revenues and return on investment. Because of this, infrastructure and service distribution become clustered in commercial districts, which have the greatest potential for economic growth. The authors critique the conventional economic evaluation criteria for infrastructure and services projects and highlight the infrastructural inequity that results from growth-oriented planning. This paper presents transit oriented development as an example of pro-growth planning and suggests new planning obligations and evaluation processes that incorporate the everyday uses of public infrastructure projects.

Introduction

Neoliberal notions of hyper-privatized land use and limit-less economic growth have divided the city into small patches of private development, complete with fragmented infrastructure and disconnected land use that increase sociospatial inequalities. Under the auspices of privatized market logic, infrastructure and service distribution become clustered in areas codified for economic growth by pro-growth interests. Often neglected in this process are economically marginalized communities, where diminishing services are in greatest need of redevelopment. The neoliberal infrastructure planning process is problematic, as economic growth is the primary project goal, relegating the spatial distribution and functionality of service delivery to a secondary planning concern. In an effort to ensure equitable and functional planning, the criteria used to evaluate the impacts of infrastructure and services must be critiqued.

Most infrastructure projects are evaluated through the lens of economic growth and justified through the analytics of value capture and economic multipliers, which focus on generating revenue and return on investment. These project metrics reinforce neoliberal understandings and favor pro-growth projects that privilege the interest of urban elites over equitable infrastructure and service distribution. Drawing on the concepts of 'exchange value' and 'use value', we examine the need for a new way of conceptualizing the impacts of infrastructure projects. While not attempting to design a formal mechanism for evaluating use value, the authors examine the need for incorporating use value and opportunity cost into the planning process.

This article starts by examining the growth mandate that stems from neoliberal planning policy and highlights the subsequent infrastructural inequity resulting from pro-growth planning regimes. After considering the

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current role of urban and regional planners, we focus on the disparity between exchange value planning and use value planning. To illustrate the material disparity of service delivery brought about by privileging economic development over use value, a study of urban transit oriented development will be presented as an example. We will end with a look at how use value can be incorporated into the project review and decision making process.

Pro-Growth Planning Regimes in the Competitive City

The increasingly privatized nature of cities and their urban infrastructure empower a coalition of elected officials, local businesses and extra-urban corporate investors. These local elites have vested interests in increased property values and the power to prescribe planning regimes that prioritize economic growth in specific areas of the city (Cochrane, 1998; Stone, 1989; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Local elites frame urban infrastructure as a means to encourage growth by attracting new investment in the region. Neoliberal logic expects this growth to bring desirable jobs and increase tax revenues for the city. Urban and regional planners, situated within the neoliberal political structure, are subject to the pressures of pro-growth mandates (Fainstien, 2010; Walters, 2010). Charged with planning public urban infrastructure that privileges the economic development goals of developers, local and regional planners are expected to design urban infrastructure to boost property value, regardless of the subsequent sociospatial inequalities (Gandy, 2002; Wakeford, 1990; Stone, 1989).

The competitive city, the moniker given for a city's effort to 'out-compete' comparable cities for capital investment, also prescribes a pro-growth planning regime focused on redeveloping the built environment with new infrastructure to attract investment (Kipfer and Keil, 2002). Following the principles of Richard Florida's (2005; 2004) creative city approach, the competitive city model relies on state of the art infrastructure and urban amenities to entice young professionals and establish an educated labor pool for relocating companies. Public-private partnerships are established to cultivate these amenities through projects such as downtown revitalization programs, entertainment districts and business improvement districts (MacLeod, 2011; Cook, 2008; Ward, 2007; Bohl, 2000). These special districts are often financed by public funding and private business donations organized though local booster organizations (Ward, 2006).

The financing for these districts typically comes from public funds, however the tax revenues in special districts often must be invested back into the district (Ward, 2011). This spatially constrained re-investment creates a closed-system, whereby any return on the initial public investment is legally prohibited from being spent on infrastructure and services outside the boundaries of the special district. The re-investment into the district is designed to attract new development and investment, creating a cyclical flow of money. These geographically delineated districts are prescribed to encourage so called 'creative' growth as a means of supporting the competitive city approach to urban governance (Florida, 2005; 2004). This approach attempts to draw 'creative' young professionals to a region with many cultural amenities, creating the young, educated labor pool that relocation corporations and start-up companies desire. The planning convention is that establishing special entertainment districts will foster the cultural and diversity prerequisites for establishing a creative city. Critiques of creative growth question the process of special commercial districts, noting that it creates enclaves of gentrification that are unsustainable without public funding (Peck, 2011; Boudreau, 2009). They also highlight the inequality in public funding for special districts, as adjacent low-income neighborhoods are often priced out of their homes as property values rise (ibid).

The allocation of funds with rigid constraints on distribution creates an inherently inequitable system that ensures investment returns to small urban districts or within specific infrastructure modes, as state and federal regulations often constrain the means by which urban infrastructure can be funded

In similar closed-fee systems, such as special district financing, municipal enterprise funds and special levies, revenue is generated by infrastructure and service impact fees which are often constrained. These special districts include public financed business improvement districts (BIDs), tax incremental financing (TIFs) and special assessment improvement districts (SAIDs). Constrained revenues are required to be reinvested back into the original mode of infrastructure. Many municipalities and other governing jurisdictions have expenditure limitations, preventing the reallocation of funds from one infrastructural mode, such as water systems, to fund another infrastructure mode, such as local road systems. Beyond local statutes, expenditure limitations are reinforced through judicial decisions, such

as the Nollan and Dolan case on exactions limitations. The court's ruling in this case limits the process by which funds can be reallocated to offset other development externalities associated with urban growth (Saxer, 2000). Similarly, this 'means-end' requirement creates a legal limitation for municipal governments. These limitations restrict the distribution of special district revenues that could address a wider set of indirect externalities, offsetting issues associated with rapid development including diminished affordable housing and congested transportation systems (Glaesner and Gottlieb, 2008; Holloway and Guy, 2000).

The privatization of infrastructure design erodes the power of city planners to shape large sections of the urban built environment

The allocation of funds with rigid constraints on distribution creates an inherently inequitable system that ensures investment returns to small urban districts or within specific infrastructure modes, as state and federal regulations often constrain the means by which urban infrastructure can be funded. A notable example are the restrictions on how fuel taxes are re-invested back into transportation infrastructure. Many states have either constitutional or statutory requirements that mandate fuel taxes be spent exclusively for highway projects, at the expense of other transportation modes or infrastructure (Rall et al, 2011).

Re-investment of general revenue usually flows toward infrastructure that meets the needs of development projects being courted by the city, rather than toward community wide infrastructure projects (Soja, 2010; Gotham, 2005). This type of pro-growth model of public investment can serve to disenfranchise large groups of urban residents, by failing to distribute commercial tax revenue beyond the sphere of new commercial development. If projects are designed to attract the most economic growth, then the infrastructural and service delivery needs for the city-at-large become a secondary goal. The practice of steering investment toward new areas of gentrification, with the greatest potential for economic growth (Smith & Graves, 2005; Brueckner & Rosenthal, 2005) is a practice that frequently displaces economically disadvantaged communities.

Politics of City Building

The privatization of infrastructure design erodes the power of city planners to shape large sections of the urban built environment. Neoliberal policies reduce public planning and funding for provenience infrastructure – such as water, sewage and other basic and essential infrastructure needs of the city – in favor of private infrastructure development and service delivery. Graham and Marvin (2001) call this process 'splintering infrastructure', noting that privatization serves to weaken the power of public planning, as more and more infrastructure projects are done on a project-by-project basis by private developers. A multitude of private projects without coordinated efforts and governmental oversight creates a landscape of fragmented development, which has a large impact on the production of the sociospatial urban form (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). At a time when city and regional planners have fewer means of planning at a city-wide scale, the power of private entrepreneurial developers to shape the urban form has increased. Neoliberal pro-growth planning regimes, which feature privatized and proprietary infrastructure, lie in sharp contrast to the provenience planning and infrastructural standardization practices employed by managerial state planners (Schmidt & Buehler, 2007).

The pressure on urban and regional planners to feed growth machine politics in the neoliberal city can be summed up in a speech by John Friedman, "Speaking as an American, I would say that official planning in my country is largely a farce. What counts with us is the politics of city-building, and that is not quite the same" (1998; authors' emphasis). The politics of city building are the politics of economic development and pro-growth coalitions. Planners are preciously situated between planning for the public good and meeting the pro-growth demands of local elites. This tension arises out of historical contradictions between the role of the progressive provenience planner of the mid-20th century and current expectations for a market oriented neoliberal planner (Orueta and Fainstien, 2009). Mirroring the state of neoclassical economics, the era of progressive social welfare planning can be viewed as a short post-Depression period situated between two periods of hyper-privatization.

By creating a competitive business environment established through private development projects, the power of public planners to design an integrated urban form has been eroded. Kipfer and Keil (2002) speak to the role of planners in the neoliberal city, noting "city planners have little control over investment and thus see their role restricted to managing the contradictions of capitalist urbanization and codifying real estate trends through the politics of development approvals. The increasing flexibility of planning practice has certainly accentuated the constraints and limitations of city planning" (pg 228). This bleak framing of contemporary planning highlights the lack of influence planners have on designing the urban built environment. Planners as 'city-builders' are situated as caretakers charged with ensuring pro-growth zoning codes and liberally approving development projects on

private property in an effort to stabilize and grow property values for local elites.

Beyond City Building: A Case for Use Value

The question then becomes, how can planners contest the growth-at-all-cost approach to infrastructure planning? Planning practice cannot simply be neutral in its politics, as planning either serves to reproduce existing social conditions and normative understandings or to contest current hegemony (Harvey, 1984; Peet, 1977). While it is easy to create a binary of neoliberal planning, where planners either work to meet pro-growth demands or contest the foundation of neoliberal logics, the reality of contemporary planners is much more complex. Planners committed to social justice are still constrained by pro-growth policies and fragmented neoliberal urban forms, requiring planners to balance incremental policy changes with broader attempts at paradigm shifts. Both approaches are necessary to secure more equity in the urban form and to contest infrastructure disenfranchisement. For the remainder of this article, we will speak to the possibilities for urban equity that stem from incremental policy changes and everyday practice that can serve as the foundation for infrastructural equity.

Infrastructure designed for the primary goal of economic development can overlook, or outright ignore, issues of service delivery and spatial distribution.

Infrastructure designed for the primary goal of economic development can overlook, or outright ignore, issues of service delivery and spatial distribution. Disenfranchised residents in marginalized areas of the city are more likely to be denied service delivery as a result of the institutionalization of pro-growth planning practices (Horner 2004, Smith, 2002). Inherently, the problem is the pro-growth planning process itself, as decisions are based on exchange values with no mechanism by which to formally consider use value. Exchange value is the monetary market value or economic impact of a project, such as increased property values and tax revenues (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Use value is the functional impact of everyday usages and material processes that occur within a space (ibid). In the case of infrastructure, use value is the actual service delivery provided by the infrastructure.

The predominance of exchange value can be seen in the use of economic impact indicators (Campbell et al, 2000). Value capture tools codify assumptions about changes in land use and their subsequent economic impact, such as the potential for generating new tax revenue through commercial development. For example, a city allocating infrastructure funding might compare two proposed public works infrastructure projects. The first project, extending water and sewage services to a newly developing commercial district, would be able to point to economic growth and the estimated increases in tax revenue to justify the initial public investment. The second proposal, a request to expand the capacity of the storm water system in an older residential area, is not able to claim there will be a monetary return on investment for the city. A use value metric that could incorporate the importance of mitigating residential flood events, as an alternative to highlighting the net gain in exchange value brought by a development project, would allow space for planners to justify conceptions of value beyond simple return of investment indices.

What underpin most of these assumptions are neoliberal pro-growth understandings that any economic growth is good growth. Not factored into value capture models are considerations of use value or lost opportunity cost resulting from private development, as public agencies are often burdened with funding additional infrastructure projects generated by private commercial growth (Theodore, et. al., 2012; Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Weber, 2002). Although growth proponents see new commercial investment as a net gain for the city, the costs of increasing transportation capacity and storm water systems to accommodate new development and special districts often require public funding beyond the revenue generated by impact fees (Carruthers & Ulfarsson, 2003; Briffault, 1999).

Facing the challenges of a finite infrastructure budget and an array of public works projects to choose from, money used for infrastructure spillover from private development projects reduces the funding available for upgrading infrastructure in neighborhoods with greater need for infrastructure access. As was the case with our example, expending scarce financial resources on the commercial development needs of the first project often means little funding remains to improve the residential storm water system requested in the second project. These scenarios become moral questions when infrastructure planning is viewed from the lens of use value, rather than relying on exchange value. Socially-just planning should prioritize the delivery of critical infrastructure and services to socioeconomically marginalized communities, over publically funded amenity infrastructure to facilitate the needs of private commercial development. If equitable service delivery is not the goal of publicly funded infrastructure projects, than the process of urban and regional planning needs to be reconsidered.

Transit Oriented Development as an Example of Exchange Value

Further exploring situations that privilege economic growth over the everyday functionality of urban infrastructure, we provide an extended example

of prioritizing exchange value over use value. In this case, we examine urban transit projects which are often designed around economic development more than the act of moving people through the city. Transit-oriented-development (TOD) increases property value around transit stations, offering gains in exchange value. Transit systems planners can fail to account for use value, as the practical needs of current transit riders are often obscured in the planning narrative. These types of transportation projects can negatively impact transit dependent residents and serve to further isolate socioeconomically marginalized communities.

As rail transit systems become a popular means for fostering redevelopment along urban corridors, more transportation planners and urban policymakers are considering light rail, streetcar and commuter rail systems. Fixed rail transit is conceptualized as a tool for managing urban sprawl and stimulating economic growth, as transit systems establish dense urban corridors for future (re) development projects (Federal Railroad Administration, 2009). Transit oriented development reshapes the topology of urban property values and embeds spatial arrangements that reinforce the neoliberal urban form of the competitive city, including the fragmentation of urban services.

Fitting with the competitive city logic, urban rail transit is framed as an amenity for young professionals and a mark of distinction that brings a city international prestige in an effort to establish a competitive advantage for attracting capital investment. According to Richard Florida's (2005) creative cities thesis, an idea that has been embraced by cities throughout North America, corporations are seeking to invest capital in cities with good transport systems and cultural amenities. Transit systems help meet many of these perceived needs for creative growth, by establishing transportation amenities and gentrified TOD zones around rail stations to attract globally mobile capital investment.

A project goal of recently established transit systems is to attract 'choice riders', which stems from the need to generate a return on investment and off-set operational costs (Author interview).[1] This neoliberal logic incentivizes local governments to plan transit systems that can establish a large middle class ridership and boost adjacent property value. These middle class 'choice riders', defined as riders that have a choice of modes for daily transportation but elect to utilize public transit, are contrasted with riders that rely on public transit as their exclusive means of transportation. Transportation planners are tasked with designing a system for 'choice riders' in areas with the greatest potential for economic growth. By focusing on 'choice riders', who are also the target demographic for TOD projects, transit systems are designed to connect the wealthy power centers of the city (see Henderson, 2006). The needs of transit dependent riders are then relegated to secondary planning concerns, serving to further marginalize already disenfranchised communities.

The lack of transportation options for socioeconomically marginalized groups is well documented. Access to public spaces of urban mobility is often established by socioeconomic status, highlighted by theories of spatial mismatch (Preston and McLafferty, 1999; Kain, 1992; 1968) and skills mismatch (Kasarda, 1985), which examine the limited employment opportunities in relationship to insufficient public transportation that isolates low income neighborhoods. The entrapment theory (Hanson and Pratt, 1994; England, 1993) examines gendered constraints of mobility, as women are expected to both work and maintain the household. However, simplistic conceptions of mobility and demography have been critiqued, noting that spatial mismatch theories fail to recognize the uneven geographies of power--specifically the complex relationship between space, power and mobility (Cresswell, 2006; Gilbert, 1998; Massey, 1993). Addressing these uneven topographies of power require special consideration by planners, to ensure equitable access to means of urban mobility.

In the case of transit, it is easy to see that the exchange value of TOD projects becomes the concern of transit projects, while the use value of moving people through the city becomes merely a mechanism for economic growth. Further confusing the matter, the federal government justifies funding of transit projects as a means to address the transportation needs of the low-come and disabled citizens, while simultaneously expecting more transit services to attract middle class suburban riders (Grengs, 2001). With spatial segregation of socioeconomic classes in the urban form, the ability to meet both of these goals with a single project requires a planning process that sets equitable access to transit for both transit dependent riders and discretionary choice riders as a top priority, rather than a secondary concern. Public transportation planners must change the focus of infrastructure design in an effort to provide more equitable access to forms of urban mobility, connect more areas of the city rather than privileging the connectivity of elite power centers, and guard against the displacement of low-income communities in transportation redevelopment projects.

Discussion

While crafting a specific mechanism for evaluating use value and opportunity cost is beyond the scope of this piece, we would like to begin to suggest ways to establish new social equity metrics to evaluate use value and prioritize publically funded infrastructure projects. Creating an evaluation tool to capture use value and opportunity costs is a vital first step to examining projects beyond the lens of economic growth. By creating an analytic, such as a use value capture, the social cost and benefits of projects can be better evaluated for infrastructure equity. One possibility is to establish a planning obligation similar to the NEPA Section 106 process, which is used to evaluate the need for cultural

resource mitigation in federal projects. The resulting use value deliverable could be a report that takes quantitative data and sets it within a larger qualitative context, in an effort to ensure that proper considerations are taken to distribute infrastructure in a more equitable and socially just manner. While many similar mechanisms could be developed to address use value, the greater issue is creating planning obligations for considering equity in the planning process.

Incorporating variations of use value into the planning process is not a novel idea, evidenced by planning obligations for use value and equity that have been instituted in many European planning context (Campbell et al, 2000). However, it is a practice that is not institutionalized in many of the current North American planning processes. There is little space for considering use value, opportunity cost or equitable distribution in the fast paced, pro-growth planning regime of the American neoliberal city. Some planning firms have made a dedicated effort to incorporate sociospatial and socioeconomic justice into infrastructure distribution and service delivery, such as the work of the Cedar Grove Institute.[2] Unfortunately, few planners are able to engage in this type of socially conscious planning, as they are constrained by the broader notions of neoliberal governance. In the context of pro-growth urban policy, evaluating the social impact of infrastructure planning is treated as a luxury, requiring more time and monetary resources than are necessary to design projects that promote economic growth. This luxury is hardly ever afforded to publically employed city and regional planners, who are ideally situated as the arbitrators of equitable access to public infrastructure. If city planners are allowed to advocate for projects using evaluations that go beyond simply cost-benefit and return-on-investment measurements, they could look beyond the large commercial development projects and make the case for infrastructure improvements that impact daily quality of life for urban residents.

Allowing for more flexibility and discretion in the sociospatial allocation of funding creates opportunities for more holistic and coherent community planning. Unfortunately, properly evaluating use value of everyday lived space has become a process reserved for philanthropic private consultants and academics steeped in theory, rather than core elements of everyday planning praxis. Our call is to create requirements and obligations for better considering use value, opportunity cost and everyday lived value into publicly funded infrastructure projects. While this need has always existed in urban planning, it is even more imperative as current neoliberal policies of hyper-privatized land use drive the evaluation and establishment of nearly all urban infrastructure projects.

It is our hope that this article will serve to re-ignite a conversation about employing planning mechanisms for sociospatial justice and infrastructural equity. When pro-growth project goals fail to consider the impacts to functional use value, the economic interests of local elites are privileged over the needs of the urban citizenry at large. Neoliberal governance mandates public investment in pro-growth infrastructure, while failing to consider the social cost of not investing in equitable distribution of provenience infrastructure, such as transit and utility services, to the spaces of the city codified as marginal. By failing to prioritize equitable access to provenance infrastructure for socioeconomically marginalized communities, planners reaffirm the sociospatial hegemony of the neoliberal urban form. City and regional planners must be committed to designing mechanisms for considering use value into the planning process, if they wish to move beyond their current role as city builders and regain their ability to (re)shape the urban form for the greater public good.

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Endnotes

[1] Results of author's research interview with rail transit planners and policymakers between 2011-2012.

[2] See http://cedargroveinst.org/ for more information about the Cedar Grove Institute for Sustainable Communites.